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# Introduction: Local Film

John Fullerton

This issue of *Film History* focuses on three concerns: local film, the local context of reception and local exhibition. The first three essays variously address what has been, until recently, a blind spot in film historiography: the production and exhibition of films which were shot in a given community and shown to local people who constituted the first (and perhaps only) audience for the film. Such films, often commissioned by cinema owners as a way of attracting larger audiences, have frequently been overlooked since little or no advertising was used to promote the exhibition of local films. In the last few years, however, initiatives such as the 'Symposia on Local Film' funded by The British Academy and involving the universities of Sheffield, Stockholm and Trier, or the Dutch project, 'Cinema, modern life and cultural identity in the Netherlands, 1896–1940', funded by the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research and involving the University of Utrecht and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, are helping film historians develop an historiography which addresses the exhibition of film in local or regional contexts.

In 'Is it You? Recognition, Representation and Response in Relation to the Local Film', Vanessa Toulmin and Martin Loiperdinger examine what Tom Gunning has characterised as the 'cry of recognition which baptizes this cinema of locality' in their consideration of the output of the British company, Mitchell and Kenyon from whom more than 830 local actuality films survive.<sup>1</sup> As with some of the Lumière films which were marketed, potentially, worldwide but also in some cases shown to local audiences, such films struck a chord with local audiences, conferring a degree of exclusivity for exhibitors who programmed local films alongside the customary mix of comedies, scenics, *féeries*, trick films and the like. For this reason, the production of local films was a compelling incentive for early exhibitors, an impor-

tant marketing ploy by which an exhibitor could beat local competition. Exclusivity, however, was not the only element such films conferred: a delight in self-recognition and the pleasures that arose from showing local films to local audiences are examined by Toulmin and Loiperdinger. The inclusion of sound accompaniment and regional dialect in the commentaries showmen provided made the magic of living pictures even more credible, a strategy which Brigitte Braun and Uli Jung examine in their consideration of local films shot in southwest Germany. Drawing on local newspapers and local archives, the authors trace the pattern of production and exhibition of local films shot by the Marzen family who not only exhibited local films as they travelled the southwest region of Germany but also at the permanent-site theatres which they later ran in Trier. The visual style of Marzen's local films is considered, as too the production of films shot of state occasions such as the visit of Wilhelm II to Metz in 1903 or the visit of the Kaiser to Trier in 1913 where films of the head of state under the sole control of an exhibitor meant good business. With approximately forty films verified to date shot between 1902 and 1929, Marzen's output is the best-documented achievement of a local filmmaker during the 'pre-sound' era in Germany, changing the production-oriented supplies of the commercial industry to the reception-oriented demands of large- and small-town exhibitors and audiences. The relation between the local and the global, a concern that surfaces in the first two essays, is developed further in Marina Dahlquist's examination of the operation of the Pathé Frères subsidiary company in Stockholm, where Pathé opened a branch in 1910 to gain a foothold in the Swedish market. The production of local films was a genre which moving picture theatre

John Fullerton is an Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at Stockholm University.

owners regularly commissioned and Pathé saw in such production the possibility of controlling film production on a national basis through local organisation. How the world's leading company adapted to a small market like Sweden with local tastes and standards are some of the issues explored by Dahlquist, particularly Pathé's association with the Swedish Biograph Company in the early 1910s.

The second part of the issue turns to a rather different interpretation of local concerns emphasising the issue of reception in local contexts. Jan Olsson's 'Trading Places: Griffith, Patten and Agricultural Modernity' examines the reception context for Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909). Drawing on political cartoons featured in New York newspapers, Olsson situates the film in relation to the increased abstraction of the modern agricultural economy, the trading of wheat futures, the rise in bread prices, and the strikes and lock-outs which characterised day-to-day experience for New Yorkers in the months before Griffith's film went into production. Against the stark realities of the period, Olsson argues that if the film obliquely acknowledges contemporary campaigns against trusts, speculators and big business, its narrative aborts the connections familiar to the historical spectator: James A. Patten's 1909 corner in wheat, an increase in the price of bread and riots in New York City. In place of strife, Olsson proposes that Griffith's archaic view of the late-nineteenth-century peasant, redolent of paintings by Jean-François Millet or the work of the American ruralists, reified relations and pushed the filmmaker towards the abstract mode of parallel editing in his search for allegory and melodramatic victimization, a response that was predicated on Griffith's refusal to confront the agricultural economy of modernity and his detachment from politics. Views of a more Arcadian past and their relation to contingency in cinematographic images of Mexico in actuality films of the 1920s are central to the essay by John Fullerton and Elaine King. Drawing on a distinction between 'local view' and 'distant scene', the authors argue that the degree to which photographic and cinematographic views evoked formal or iconographic conventions, or departed from established norms, charged the reception of local views with a dramaturgy that extended beyond the local context. Comparing views available in nineteenth-century chromolithographs and photographs with actuality films produced in the 1920s, some of the contingent perceptual experiences that the cinematographic view and amateur

photography instituted are compared with nineteenth-century viewing practices associated with the rise of early mass visual culture. Fullerton and King conclude that although some surviving actuality films shot in Mexico during the 1920s declare their modernity, they also, on occasion, attest to deep-rooted conventions associated with the picturesque. In this respect, the authors identify some of the registers of affect which cinematographic views may have mobilised.

The final part of the issue comprises essays which consider local or regional exhibition. Two studies examine film exhibition in the heartlands of Sweden and Norway, two essays examine black movie-going in Durham and other cities in North Carolina and the reception Josephine Baker was accorded in Stockholm from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, and two essays examine exhibition and innovation in Utrecht in 1936 and the development of exhibition in the Dutch mining province of Limburg in the inter-war period.

In 'Reform and Entertainment: Film Exhibition and Leisure in a Small Town in Sweden at the End of the Nineteenth Century', Åsa Jernudd focuses on the earliest exhibition of film in Örebro, a market town to the west of Stockholm, where Jernudd examines the social and cultural milieu, and the impact commercial entertainment had in a town that was regarded as a litmus of provincial life in Sweden at the turn of the century. Drawing on advertisements for leisure activities in the local newspaper between 1897 and 1899, Jernudd characterises the social and cultural arena into which film exhibition was incorporated by travelling showmen, identifying the various constituencies and the impact cultural events had on local public discourse. Jernudd demonstrates how early film exhibition took its place alongside entertainment provided by travelling troupes such as the circus, variety shows, wax cabinets and menageries, and popular movements such as the religious and temperance movements and the development of workers' associations in the late nineteenth century. Jernudd concludes that film exhibitors who visited Örebro probably sought cultural legitimacy and a popular audience through allying themselves with the liberal and religious nonconformist worker associations. A similar focus on local exhibition characterises Gunnar Iversen's investigation of cinema regulation and film censorship in Trondheim (present-day Trondheim) on the west coast of Norway before the Norwegian Board of Film Censors was

established in Kristiania (present-day Oslo) in October 1913. Thought previously to be a relatively anarchic cultural arena, Iversen's account characterises local ordinances and considers the censorship of one of Norway's first feature films, *Dæmonen* (*The Demon*, 1911). Using municipal archives and the archives of the Justice Department in Oslo, the picture that Iversen draws is far different to that which has traditionally characterised our understanding of film regulation and censorship in Trondheim before the Norwegian censorship board was established.

In 'From the Buzzard's Roost: Black Movie-going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities during the Early Period of American Cinema', Charlene Regester examines the experience of film viewing from the so-called Buzzard's Roost, the galleries or balconies where African-American audiences were segregated, and contrasts this experience with movie-going in black-owned and black-operated theatres in Durham and other cities in North Carolina. Regester documents how African-American audiences confined to the Buzzard's Roost were also frequently compromised in their viewing of film (by poor sight lines and the like) as well as occupying a public space that connoted humiliation and degradation. How African-Americans responded to this experience and how such practices fuelled the development of black-owned theatres in North Carolina in the 1910s and 1920s is examined by Regester. Controversy over the exhibition of *Hallelujah* (1929), the continuing segregation of audiences in the late 1930s and the ambition to make films for African-American audiences in later years are also documented. The critical reception accorded Josephine Baker in Stockholm between 1927 and 1935 forms the focus of Ylva Habel's essay, 'To Stockholm, with Love', where Habel discusses how Baker's international reputation was reinterpreted in the local context. Examining the critical reception of Baker in the touring revue, *Wien – Wien – Josephine* (1928), and contrasting that reception with the reception that attended the world premiere of *La Sirène des Tropiques* (*Siren of the Tropics*, 1927), Habel establishes that Baker's appearance in Stockholm seems to have initially confirmed a vaguely defined notion of 'cosmopolitan' glamour, one which accorded with the contemporary star image of Baker. Commodity branding and the circulation of Baker's star image as discussed by readers and critics in the local press help Habel characterise Baker's reception in Stockholm in the late 1920s. Habel goes on to consider

the reception the star was accorded when she returned to stage revues in 1932 and 1933 and compares this with the reception that attended the opening of the film, *Zou-Zou*, in Stockholm in 1935. Habel proposes that medium specificity as well as the distance from which the spectator sat relative to the stage or screen may have played a significant role in the different responses which the two media variously orchestrated. Unlike the stage revue, which tended to confirm received opinion, *Zou-Zou* seems to have effected a transformation, one which may have been perceived as, potentially, monstrous or, at the very least, uncanny.

The last two essays examine aspects of local exhibition in the Netherlands. Bert Hogenkamp, in 'A Curly Top, a Royal Engagement and a Local Bylaw', examines cinema exhibition in Utrecht in 1936 with regard to the opening of films starring Shirley Temple. The fact that young people were not allowed to see the films (since local ordinances meant that persons under sixteen were banned from attending film shows in Utrecht) offered local exhibitors the opportunity of campaigning to repeal a local bylaw, a measure which exhibitors had fought against since it came into force in 1915. Although it could be argued that the 1936 campaign was just another moment in an ongoing struggle to maximise trade, Hogenkamp proposes that a new factor came into play over the exhibition of films starring Shirley Temple: that the desire to repeal the ordinance was part of a broader strategy to win over the general public, if not the authorities, to the view that cinema was a modern and superior form of entertainment. In particular, Hogenkamp identifies the arrival of Isedor Cohen Barnstijn and sound film on the exhibition scene in Utrecht in 1929 as the principal force in this redefinition of cinema in the public sphere. Charting exhibitors' responses to these developments in Utrecht (including the redesigning of at least one cinema by the prestigious De Stijl designer and architect, Gerrit Rietveld), Hogenkamp details the look-alike contest that a local fashion store organised as a promotion for the opening of the Shirley Temple film, *Curly Top* in 1936, a few days before the directors of all seven Utrecht film theatres published an appeal to repeal the law. Although the ruling was not repealed until 1941 (when German occupying forces decided to do away with what they considered to be a local anomaly), Hogenkamp proposes that the redevelopment of cinemas in Utrecht in the mid-1930s was part of a larger gambit wherein film ex-

hibitors demonstrated their civic responsibility to the public at large under the guise of a programme of modernisation and innovation. With Thunnis van Oort's essay, "That pleasant feeling of peaceful cosiness", the southern Dutch mining district of Heerlen is the focus of a discussion of how exhibitors in the inter-war years mediated between bourgeois elites (represented in government and church authorities) and the demands of local audiences in establishing cinema in a region where traditional Catholic values were upheld and where there was also a strong tradition of youth clubs, leisure and sports clubs advised by the church and by the state mining industry. In contextualising the social organisation of film exhibition in the region, van Oort draws on government documents, newspapers, company records and oral history to chart the opening of the first wave of permanent-site venues in the early 1910s and characterise the social dynamic that attended their operation in towns such as Hoensbroek and Kerkrade. Van Oort examines the conflicting loyalties that exhibitors had to negotiate between their obligation to audiences and the mining industry on the one hand, and the power that was exercised, on the other hand, by church authorities. The role of

the Netherlands Cinema League which brought distributors and exhibitors together in 1921 in a national organisation is also examined. Van Oort concludes that the example of exhibition in Hoensbroek illustrates how difficult it was to establish a new entertainment business in the region where successful exhibitors had to act as intermediaries between their audiences and the regulatory bodies of local government, the church, the Dutch State Mines and the Netherlands Cinema League.

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**John Fullerton**

### Note

1. Tom Gunning, 'Pictures of Crowd Splendour: The Mitchell and Kenyon Factory Gate Film', in Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple and Patrick Russell (eds.),

*The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 52.

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